

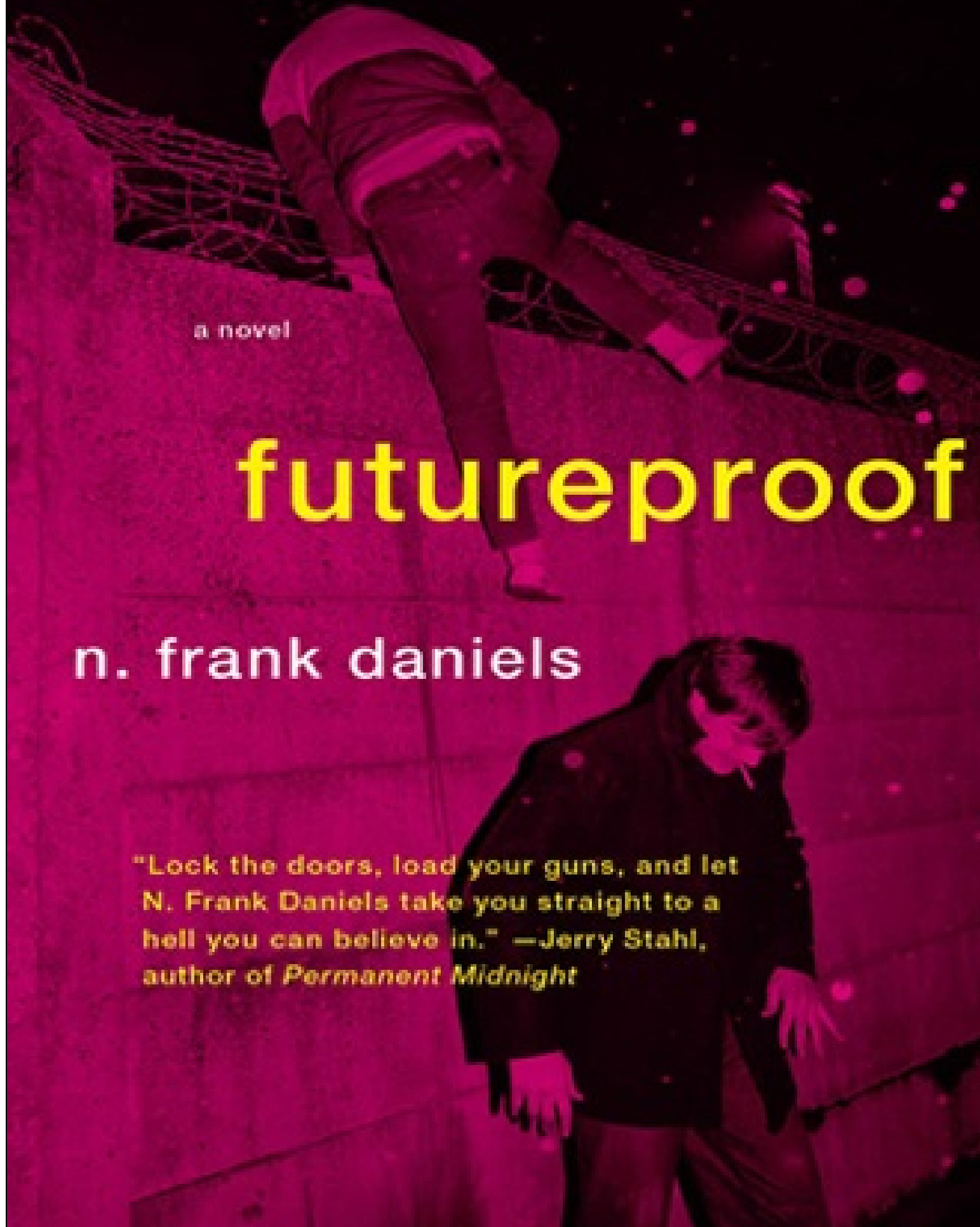
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a novel

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Futureproof

A Novel

N. Frank Daniels

 HarperCollins e-books

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The past is not dead. It isn't even past.

—**William Faulkner**

He felt as though he were wandering in the forests of the sea bottom, lost in a monstrous world where he himself was the monster. He was alone. The past was dead, the future was unimaginable.

—**George Orwell, 1984**

Now is the only thing that's real.

—**Charles Manson**

TRANSMISSION 01:

over the shirt, under the bra

September

Peckerbrook High—like every other high school—sucks. But Peckerbrook sucks for one or maybe two specific reasons in addition to all the other reasons high schools suck in general.

At Peckerbrook, every pupil is either “artistic” (as implied by its status as a Performing Arts Magnet School) or black. This isn’t to say that there aren’t black people registered in the vaunted arts classes. But in a school that is sixty-five percent African-American (a “vibrant and culturally rich community” is what the brochure says), only five people of color are involved in its arts program, which includes hundreds of students.

Most of us white kids are bussed in from the wealthier communities in the northern sector of the county. The rest of us have mothers like mine—women living in the squalor of the outer city limits who see their children succeeding where they never could, insisting that their sons and daughters are the next Brandos or Streeps or Barbra frickin’ Streisands.

The black kids laugh at us “performing” white folk, then deal drugs right in front of the school, selling little bags of weed and crack after the faculty has gone home for the day.

Once I had to wait for my mother to pick me up (she was late, as usual), and these four crack-slingers walked over and just started beating on my head. A Samaritan in a BMW pulled up moments later and chased them away with an umbrella and his middle-class white-man authority.

My first day in drama this tall, unaffected Amazon of a girl sits beside me as I cocoon myself in a corner of the theater.

“You don’t need to worry,” she assures me. “All the drama people are cool.”

I try smiling at her.

She is beautiful. She says her name is Tabitha. And unlike much of Atlanta, which consists of people who have transferred here from all points north, she has a *true* Southern accent—and breasts that round out the top of her shirt like an answer to prayer.

Class begins with a series of exercises where everybody lies on the floor and focuses on their breathing.

Breathe.

Listen to yourself breathe.

Then comes the “stress reduction” massage.

Tabitha scoots up next to me and asks if I’ll “do” her.

“Do? Yeah...OK.”

She lies in front of me and waits, eyes closed.

I touch her, allowing the palms of my hands to skim the linen of her shirt.

She asks if I am going to actually rub her back or just pretend.

“This part isn’t supposed to be acting,” she informs me.

“I know, I was just warming up,” I say, trying to sound natural.

I begin at her neck, for real this time, kneading soft circles around the muscles and then down the spine and out to the shoulder blades, allowing my hands to pass over the contours of her body.

This goes on for some time before she begins moaning softly and I have to...*readjust*. With every moan I become more aroused and with every readjustment it seems she moans louder.

“Go under my shirt,” she says.

I pull her shirt up to the middle of her back, just below the bra strap, and watch as goose bumps form. She is magnificent.

“Pull it up all the way.”

“*All* the way?” I whisper.

“Yeah, all the way,” she repeats, her head on her forearms, eyes still closed. She rises off the floor slightly so that I can get her t-shirt past her bra. I look around at the rest of the class to gauge how they are dealing with the striptease developing in their midst but no one seems to have the slightest idea.

“Does this feel good?” I ask, trying to keep my breathing in check.

“It doooes.”

I swallow. “Good.”

I continue rubbing, trying to be professional about it and all.

Then she pushes herself up onto her forearms, turns to face me. “Two things,” she says. “I want you to take your index and middle fingers on both hands, bend them at the knuckle, then pinch and

twist. It feels better when it hurts a little.”

She lies down again and closes her eyes like before. I look at my hands and practice the twisting motion with my fingers before I go back to work on her.

“What was the second thing?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Tabitha purrs as I pinch her. “Unsnap my bra.”

I want to make love to her.

“How do you do that?” Now I’m panicking.

“Just push the ends in toward each other and it’ll snap free.”

Finally the clasp loosens and separates. Her bra slips away and there I sit, straddling her bottom with a hard-on, her naked back begging me to touch it, to make love to it with my fingers. I can see her tan lines and how the sides of her breasts remain their natural flesh tone, completely uncorrupted by sun.

The more I rub the harder I get and I wonder if she can feel me through my pants. I *want* her to feel me. The tanned canvas of her back is mine for the taking and I imagine myself an artist of the highest vocation, sculpting her into immortality.

Her skin gathers between my fingers, and no matter how hard I pull or pinch, it always snaps back into place leaving a red welt, the only reminder of my concentrated ministrations. She moans with every twist, every pull. Her breasts protrude on either side of her prone body, pushed out slightly. There are no visible nipples or anything of that magnitude, but there *is* the definitive swell. It is the unmistakable sight of finality, fullness, completeness, the ultimate signifier of female perfection.

It occurs to me that I’ve never seen a real-life breast until that moment.

“Why’d you stop rubbing?”

I’m stuck, staring at her breast swells, my hands motionless on her back.

“Hey!”

“Huh?” I snap to attention.

She opens one eye and looks at me, shifts under my weight, and rises up just enough so that I can see her right breast fully rounded as it hangs suspended in the sweltering air.

She drops her arms out from under her and sinks back to the floor.

“Were you looking at my tits?”

I meet her upturned eye, ashamed. I’ve been distracted from the business of theater by something as inconsequential as a breast.

“No,” I proclaim.

“Why not?” she counters, her eyes closed once again and a smile widening across her perfect face.

I’ve never gotten this much attention from anyone. And Tabitha has no qualms about using her sexuality to drive me batshit. She encourages me to take afternoon naps at her apartment. In her bed, no less. While she’s *in* it.

After about the third day hanging out, it’s obvious to both of us that I’d marry her whenever she might come around to that brilliant idea. So, because of my unabashed and unwavering loyalty to her I’ve been awarded certain perks. Perks that most best-friends-of-the-opposite-sex-that-aren’t-boyfriends wouldn’t get. For example, I can sleep in her bed—but not have sex with her. I can’t see her naked—but she’ll lie next to me wearing only her panties and an XXL t-shirt that skirts just past her thighs. She’ll wrestle with me and if I manage to pin her for some arbitrary amount of time she’ll allow me to heft the weight of her breasts in my hands. And then I’ll watch in excruciating pleasure as her nipples get stiffer beneath the fabric of her shirt, because she’s turned on by the game of playing *me*. It’s not a spiteful game, exactly, but one where she already knows the outcome and I am the kind of naive sucker who falls into all the little traps designed specifically to enhance her vanity. Yes, I’m *that guy*, the pathetic *friend* you always see in the movies, the nice guy who would give anything for his female comrade to finally realize that he is the one that’ll make everything right.

She has her boyfriends and her pile-driver sex, but she always comes back to me to talk about how big a loser what’s-his-name was.

“See, Luke,” she’s always saying to me, “*this* is why I don’t ever want us to have sex. It would ruin everything.”

“Are you saying that every time anyone has sex they’re ruining a potential friendship?” I counter.

“No, not every time. I mean, there are people who have sex and love each other and get along great, I guess. But usually people are only having sex for their own amusement and it fucks up any real possibility.”

“It wouldn’t fuck *us* up.”

She looks at me. She knows. “I can’t do that, Luke. You know that.”

“Then why do you keep messing with me like this, especially when you know I want to be with you the way Robert has, and Ron and Damien?”

“You mean you wanna *fuck* me?” She’s sitting up now, pushing me off her. “Is that what you want? You want to be just another dick? Fine, I’ll fuck you, Luke. Take off your pants.”

She tries to unbutton my jeans. I grab her arms and, despite weeks of fantasizing to the contrary, try to *prevent* her from taking my clothes off.

“No, Luke, our relationship isn’t good enough for you.” She continues struggling with me. “You want my brain, my trust, my love, *and* my body, so I’ll give it to you. I’ll slide my pussy onto your cock and bring you to mind-numbing orgasm. I’m already slick and wet and ready for you.”

Reverse psychology be damned, I am more turned on than I’ve ever been.

“But just remember,” she continues as I lie helpless on her bedroom floor, her fingers nimbly working me out of my pants, “that as soon as you get this...you lose the brain, the trust, and the love.”

“Why does it have to be like that?” I’m gasping with anticipation now, watching her hands, her heaving chest.

“Poor Luke.” She shakes her head. “You’re going to want me to stay at your house and hold your hand and act like we love each other the way *you* want us to love each other and I’m not going to be able to love you like that and then you’ll see what I was talking about when I said sex would ruin us.” She’s so frigging self-assured. I hate that.

She’s got me out of my pants now and I’m hard as all hell but Tabitha ignores my pecker in her hand, which really sucks or blows or whatever because I’ve always wanted to know what she thought of my size compared to her boyfriends’. She’s staring into my eyes and squeezing me purple.

“Why can’t we have all of it?”

“I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone, honey. But I guess something’s wrong with me. You’re too *nice* or something. All the guys I’m attracted to are total dicks who I could never actually love. So maybe I’m just fucked.”

I’ve resigned myself, yet again, to zero satisfaction. My hard-on rapidly falters.

I open my mouth to speak but close it just as quickly. Then try once more to get it out. “So this isn’t true love, what we have?”

“I don’t know what it is. I just know that I love what we have, exactly the way it is now. I want to always have each other. And I know if we fuck, I’ll change—and so will you.”

“No—”

She shrugs. “And then whatever we had will be gone.”

I feel myself going numb, the blood returning to other organs.

“Please let go of me.”

“I’m sorry.”

I stand and turn to zip up.

“You’re right, Tab,” I assure her. “You’re always right.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, Luke. I love you and I wouldn’t trade you for anything. I’m selfish that way, I guess. Something about her mouth looks like regret. Probably not, but I’ll take it as such.

“Well, just don’t stop letting me feel you up. I can’t tell you how much that means to me,” I say.

She smiles.

I stare at my feet in their socks, look up to meet her eyes.

“I love you, Luke.” She puts her hand on my shoulder.

TRANSMISSION 02:

the horror!

October

The note Tab passes me during a particularly grueling period of Mrs. Hingleton's English class reads "You want to do something crazy tonight? Get an alibi and meet me at my house by ten."

I am glistening with anticipation. An anticipation stymied only by the fact that I'm gonna have to sell some kind of bullshit story to my parents. They always have these totally self-righteous ideas about who is deserving of our "fellowship." Compounding the problem, my mother is positive that I'll screw anything in a skirt. She has no idea that I've been relegated to the little-brother/best-friend type. Of course, she'd never believe me if I told her this. I'm the next Brando. Looks and all. High cheekbones, the works.

The key to my going out is to get my mother separated from Victor. She's much more inclined to cave in after a few concentrated minutes of pleading, as long as no sex will be involved.

I gather myself, try to look as casual as possible, and move across the threshold from my room. Victor is sprawled on the couch in the living room, bathed in television glow and wearing only his underwear. I move past him nonchalantly and make it to the adjacent room without having to exchange so much as a grunted acknowledgment.

I slip into Jonas' bedroom where he sits with our mother, examining a textbook.

"Listen, Ma? I'm going over to Jason's house and we're gonna hang out, listen to music and stuff. I'll be back sometime tomorrow morning. He's a guy I met in drama class." I talk up the part about drama class because this implies that I'm actually getting into being in the *performing arts*, the way my mother was right about that after all.

She sits there sizing me up, narrows her eyes.

"Sure, you can go. As long as Jason's parents said it's OK."

Jonas looks up at me. His envy is obvious, seeing as he's only thirteen and therefore in possession of far less privilege than me. I give Mother a long, appreciative hug, scrub the top of Jonas' head with an absent hand.

"Keep hittin' those books, kid. Maybe you'll get to be as smart as me someday."

"I'm already smarter than you," he says, punching me on the arm.

This will be the first time I've ever spent a night out with no parental supervision. The half-mile walk up the road to Tabitha's house is open and resplendent as the sunset riots out before me. It's as though God himself has condoned these preliminary steps into the world. Altogether it is the sort of autumn evening one remembers through the tang of wood smoke, when the leaves are all brilliant oranges and reds and the temperature is sheer perfection—the kind of night when you can feel the rest of your life unfolding according to plan.

Tabitha is smoking a cigarette on the cement stoop outside her apartment. Her “friend” 8-Ball is on his way over to pick us up, she says. She drops the cigarette, stubbing it out with her slipper, and heads back inside to the bathroom. Her mom is watching TV in the back bedroom. She yells an acknowledgment to me and I yell back. Her mom is always nice to me in a pitying, I-know-your-parents-suck-and-you'll-be-lucky-to-get-out-alive kind of way, but I appreciate it nonetheless.

“I don't know why you have to wear so much makeup,” I tell Tabitha. “You're already beautiful without it.”

“I know you think that, but there's still the matter of the rest of the sane world thinking the same.”

“Well...fuck 'em if they don't.”

I smile at her mirror-face. She glares back, a lipstick half forgotten in her hand. “Please leave me alone for a minute so I can finish.”

I continue watching her. “You're not wearing a bra, are you?”

“None of your business.”

“Can I feel?”

“No!” She laughs and pushes me, narrowly missing my shirt with her lipstick. “Get out!”

I step outside the bathroom. “Do you think we have time for a quickie before it's time to leave?”

She slams the door.

Tab's friend 8-Ball talks a thousand miles an hour, punctuated by cackling laughter that makes you want to quit your job and follow him. And he's a maniac on the road. He cuts off other cars with complete disregard and takes hairpin turns at 60 m.p.h.

“He always drives like this,” Tabitha yells over the blaring stereo.

“Do I look scared or something?”

Tab shrugs and looks away. “Maybe. Not really.”

“Good. Because I'm not.”

We screech into a parking lot, the bottom of 8-Ball's rust-bucket Ford scraping against the curb

"We're heeeerrrrre," Tabitha intones in her best *Poltergeist* impression.

"We're where?" I ask. "This is the big surprise? A run-down movie theater?"

"It doesn't matter what the outside looks like, silly. It's what is happening on the inside."

"Good one, Tab. '*Don't judge a book by its cover.*' Great. Gee, I think I know that lesson. I remember it from *A Tale of Two Cities* in Hingleton's class. The picture of the guillotine on the front cover made it seem like the book would actually be interesting but it fucking sucked."

"Dude." 8-Ball turns to me matter-of-factly. "Chill. This is going to blow your goddam mind. I promise." He gives me a Cheshire cat grin that is more disturbing than reassuring.

In the parking lot kids sporting baggy pants are skateboarding, ramping off the cement staircase on either end of the theater sidewalk. As we approach the dilapidated box office I can see people milling around the lobby through a fog of cigarette smoke. One guy wears a foot-long Mohawk that sticks straight up. Another one has white makeup caked all over his face and lipstick smeared haphazardly around his mouth. There's a couple decked out in leather bondage gear making out in a dark corner. There are four comic book dorks playing ancient Atari arcade games against the wood-paneled wall.

It's a wild, beautiful circus, without the juggling. My eyes burn with all there is to take in. *These* are the people Victor always refers to as freaks.

"Well, whaddaya think?" Tabitha whispers in my ear.

"What is this place?"

"This, my young friend, is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.*"

As we walk into the theater, a guy dressed in red-and-black leather chaps is yelling from a stage in front of the movie screen.

"Rule number six!"

"SEX!" the crowd yells back at him in unison.

"SIX!"

"SEX!"

"Have it your way! Rule number seven: There is no rule number seven! Rule number eight! No sex with your date unless you brought one for me!"

I give Tabitha my "What an idiot" look.

"Just watch," she implores.

“Are there any virgins in the house?” the leather-chapped freak yells.

I look around the theater. Amazingly, only a few hands go up.

There is no way in hell I’m admitting to this guy that I’m a virgin. He looks like the demented ringmaster of a bondage circus.

“We’ve got a virgin right over here,” a voice proclaims, not six inches from my head.

I glance at Tab and 8-Ball and shriek back in horror to find them vigorously pointing at me. 8-Ball is laughing so hard tears are rolling down his cheeks.

“I am not a virgin!” I yell in desperation, turning to Tabitha. Here sits a woman who at one time had her hand on my actual throbbing member. That has to be worth something.

“Not a virgin like that, Luke. A virgin at *Rocky* is someone who’s never seen the movie.”

I watch in dread as the Ringmaster approaches me with his little green-tinted sunglasses and a cast of willing lackeys following behind him. I’m led down the aisle along with the other unfortunate who’ve been ratted out by their so-called friends. As we are marched onto the stage I take solace in the fact that at least I’m not alone.

The crowd mocks us, chanting, “VIR-GIN! VIR-GIN!”

Two girls dressed like low-rent hookers approach the stage. One has reddish hair pulled up on top of her head and is wearing a black teddy that shows off her tits nicely. The other has dark, wiry hair that grows in all directions, a body that would stop a truck. I recognize her from school. She winks at me, which is comforting.

The “hookers” line us up across the stage, facing the crowd.

The first guy to be deflowered looks about my age and appears ready to shit himself. The crowd yells:

“Make him deep-throat a hot dog!”

“Have him run around the building naked!”

It is decided that he should have to receive simulated anal sex from the redheaded hooker. He does a piss-poor job of it. Barely a sound comes out of his mouth. He’s obviously never taken any drama classes.

Then it’s my turn.

With his bony fingers gripping my arm, the Ringmaster asks the crowd to hand down my fate.

The decree is announced.

I am to give the kinky-haired hooker simulated cunnilingus. The proclamation is barely

pronounced and I find myself awash in relief. There will be no public speaking or fake sex noises. I just have to pretend to lick this woman from top to bottom, a scenario I've imagined about a million times. I stick my tongue out as far as it will go, like that one ugly bastard from KISS. The crowd cheers me on.

Twenty seconds later the girl lets go of my hair and I scurry back to the relative safety of my seat, feeling the blood drain from my face, the adrenaline really starting to kick in.

“Thanks a lot, Tab.”

“Oh, you'll be alright, Luke. Wasn't that fun?” She flutters her eyes at me.

As the theater darkens for the showing of the film, small groups begin slipping off to poorly lit areas of the theater: guys making out with other guys and girls doing the same. A line of men snakes their way into the Women's Room and leaving minutes later with smirks on their faces as they zip their pants. After the last guy zips up, a trappy-looking woman emerges looking disheveled but grinning nonetheless, evidently proud of herself. She goes by the name Squirrely because, she brags to anyone who'll listen, she “can fit more nuts in her mouth than a squirrel.”

The debauchery taking place in the theater mimics the movie's ethos of “Live your life based purely on the pleasures that you can derive from it.” My mom says Satanists have that same ethos, but then again, so did Walt Whitman.

In the movie, a couple gets a flat tire in a rainstorm and has to go to an apparently haunted castle for help. It is soon revealed that the inhabitants of the castle are two lesbians, a resurrected Elvis impersonator, and a flaming transvestite named Frank N. Furter.

Like some even more demented Dr. Frankenstein, Frank creates this buff-looking homo guy named Rocky, whom he can screw whenever he pleases. I think in the end somebody ends up being from a different planet. The movie pretty much sucks, even with the crowd yelling out ad-libbed dialogue over the actors.

I keep coming back, though, because these people, despite their moral depravity, despite their lack of social interaction skills, they accept everybody that shows up, no matter what.

There is a certain loneliness that hangs in the air, and we all feel it. We are all at home with it. Behind the façade of people being irresponsible and reprehensible and in all other ways completely morally bankrupt, there is a hopelessness that holds us together. This sadness is the glue between skaters and cross-dressing faggots, between the mohawked punks and computer dorks who've catalogued and categorized every episode of *Star Trek*, going so far as to speak to one another in Klingon. One night some idiot showed up wearing sunglasses and a wife-beater in fifteen-degree weather. These people don't function in any “normal” reality. They must stay holed up in their parents' basements, plotting revenge on the world five days a week, but on Friday and Saturday night they turn out en masse to mingle with their kind. I mean, the movie is a geek magnet. But despite these surface differences, they are there for you, whether you're the coolest dude on earth or a man trapped in a woman's body. Or vice versa.

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